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ABSTRACT

Approaches used in marriage counseling may prove effective in resolving roommate conflict since there are many similarities between marriage and roommate relationships. A simple behavioral model for roommate conflict resolution is described based on a model for resolving marital conflict. It is assumed that conflict occurs when maladaptive attempts, usually aversive, are used to change another person's behavior. Specific pleasing and displeasing behaviors are tabulated and used in time-limited contracts which attempt to change behaviors leading to conflict. (Author)

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A BEHAVIORAL MODEL FOR ROOMMATE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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There are many similarities between the roommate and marriage relationship. In both, contracts are present, domestic articles are shared, and personal interests frequently parallel. Similarities also exist between the way roommates and married couples fight. An upset roommate may give his fellow roommate the "silent treatment" or resort to sarcasm. If conflicts become too serious, the dormitory contract may be broken, just as with divorce in marriage.

The significance of marriage conflict is reflected in the 80% increase in the divorce rate in the United States over the past ten years (1). In response, counseling approaches have been developed and books written to help heal marriage conflicts; many of these approaches are useful in resolving roommate conflict since relationship qualities are similar to both. Even the most ineffective marriage counseling approaches would seem more effective toward resolving roommate conflict than marriage conflict due to the absence of sexual role expectations present in the marriage relationship.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to relate a behavioral approach for resolving roommate conflict modified from a marriage counseling framework developed by Weiss, Hope, and Patterson (2).

A SIMPLE BEHAVIORAL APPROACH

Communication-oriented marriage counselors attempt to help their clients become more open, honest, and direct with their feelings. However, specific obnoxious and observable behavior are the basis for consultation with the marriage counselor. Maladaptive attempts to alter or terminate a partner's obnoxious

behavior, e.g., nagging, result in marital conflict (3).

Similarily, conflict between roommates frequently arises from the obnoxious behavior of one of the roommates, e.g., typing a paper after 2 AM. The tired roommate whose sleep was interrupted may indirectly attempt to change his roommate's future behavior through sarcasm or by refusing to lend his typewriter.

The goal of treatment in both marriage and roommate conflict is to alter or terminate displeasing behavior causing conflict. Using this simple behavioral model, roommates are first brought together to discuss their problems through the encouragement of a counselor or resident hall advisor. Pleasing and displeasing behaviors are tabulated by each roommate and used in developing a contract for behavioral change. Writing a contract for change demands that roommates negotiate with each other. Pleasing as well as displeasing behaviors are pinpointed to increase awareness of positive attributes of each roommate and to encourage reduction of displeasing behavior in return for pleasing behavior of the opposite roommate.

The behavioral model is explained by the following concrete problem example and steps to its solution:

> Roommate X will not speak to Roommate Y because Y plays Western music which interrupts X's ability to concentrate effectively. Roommate X asks Resident Hall Advisor Z if he can move; thus avoiding Y and the problem.

Steps to Solution:

1. Resident Hall Advisor Z calls X and Y to his room for a roommate conference to urge discussion of their conflicts.
2. Z listens attentively to X's story using frequent paraphrasing for full understanding, e.g., "Do you mean...?"
3. Z listens to Y's story similar to Step 2.
4. Z asks both X and Y if they are willing to attempt to solve the problem.
5. If no, both X and Y know where they stand with each other. Either X and Y terminate their roommate relationship or find another solution to their problem.

6. If both roommates agree to attempt solving their conflict, specific please and displease behavioral data are obtained from each roommate about the other in each other's presence, e.g., "X please tell me all the behaviors in which Y engages which please you and displease you," and vice versa. Data are written down and kept by both about each other for further additions during the week to follow. See Roommate Please and Displease Data Sheet example in Appendix.

7. Please/displease data must be observable, i.e., it must not be a judgmental statement like, "X is a slob;" rather, "X never washes his jeans."

8. Negotiation for change is begun, remembering that certain please/displeases will have different positive and negative values.

9. A Weekly Contract is made using specific pleases and displeases of both roommates. After X and Y come to agreement, they co-sign the contract which is to be posted in their room. See Contract example in Appendix.

10. New contracts are made each week as needed at a specific time in the Resident Advisor's room. Interventions are terminated by Z as soon as possible.

DISCUSSION

Steps 1-5 are typical communication approaches; Steps 6-10 are behavioral approaches and are meant to augment initial communication steps. As stated in Step 7, the pinpointing of specific observable behavior is crucial for effective behavioral conflict resolution since specific behaviors may be modified. Judgmental statements (resulting from obnoxious behavior) are usually unpredictable and fruitless in helping a person change.

One of the most significant attributes of this behavioral approach is its simplicity. Although the more experience the counselor has the better, the approach may be used by a student resident hall advisor as well as the skilled marriage counselor.

If the approach is attempted, roommates will likely benefit in some way no matter how far the approach is carried out. If the conflicted roommates refuse to go any further than Step 5, they still know where they stand with each other.

If resolution occurs, roommates have learned a problem-solving tool. Both roommates will have a greater awareness of behaviors which are pleasing and displeasing to others. A successful resolution may result in a lasting and more meaningful realtionship between roommates and possibly others through increased awareness regarding how each affect other people.

If none of the Steps are taken, roommates may continue to alienate others with their behavior in the future. By not attempting to resolve their problems, roommates risk establishing escape as the only method of solving conflict situations.

SUMMARY

Approaches used in marriage counseling may prove effective in resolving roommate conflict since there are many similarities between marriage and roommate relationships. A simple behavioral model for roommate conflict resolution is described based on a model for resolving marital conflict. It is assumed that conflict occurs when maladaptive attempts, usually aversive, are used to change another person's behavior. Specific pleasing and displeasing behaviors are tabulated and used in time-limited contracts which attempt to change behaviors leading to conflict.

APPENDIX

Example: Data on Roommate X completed by Roommate Y

ROOMMATE PLEASE AND DISPLEASE DATA SHEET

Pleases:

1. *Straightens the room before going to bed.*
2. *Never has bull sessions in our room while I study.*

Displeases:

1. *Frequently forgets to lock the door when leaving.*
2. *Opens both windows when going to sleep.*
3. *Types until midnight frequently.*

Example: Data on Roommate Y
completed by Roommate X

ROOMMATE PLEASE AND DISPLEASE DATA SHEET

Pleases:

1. *Plays Frisbie with me frequently.*
2. *Introduces me to his female acquaintances.*

Displeases:

1. *Plays Western music continuously.*
2. *Leaves his books on my bed.*
3. *Leaves his wet washrag in a ball in our washbasin.*

Example

BEHAVIORAL CONTRACT

I, y, agree to operate the radio from 5-7 PM only.

Consequences for failure to execute:

If I fail to do the above, THEN I will vacuum the rug Friday afternoon.

Terms of this contract are non-negotiable for a period of one week.

Signed _____

Date _____

BEHAVIORAL CONTRACT

I, X, agree to open only one window at bedtime.

Consequences for failure to execute:

If I fail to do the above, THEN I will type only between 6-7 PM daily.

Terms of this contract are non-negotiable for a period of one week.

Signed _____

Date _____

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